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CHRISTIAN MARCLAY

Interview by Jason Gross (March 1998)

Where hip-hop artists revolutionized what was possible as a disk jockey, Christian Marclay upped the ante with making the turntable into a legitimiate instrument itself. Since the late '70's, in performances, recordings, installations and exhibtions at clubs, concert halls, galleries and museums around the world, Marclay has taken the stereo components that we take for granted and made them into expressive tools. Creating a dizzying array of sound collages with dozens of records at a time, with no steady, reassuring beat to go along with it, he makes and remakes the sounds from all kinds of sources something much different from their original intention. If there's a way to scratch, break, bend, warp or reconstruct a record, Marclay knows how to do it.

One important point here- it's not just the WAY that he uses records and turntables that is astonishing because his sound sculputures themsevles are provactive, funny, challenging and inventive. Two new CD's from Marclay will be coming out later this year on Asphodel.

PSF: You started working with records/turntables as instruments in college. How did that start?

CM: I was a student at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston and I was interested in performance art and punk rock. I was interested in what artists like Vito Acconci or Joseph Beuys were doing with performance and I was also very interested in the energy of punk rock. For me there was an interesting relation between the two. Being in art school and wanting to make music was not an obvious choice but I felt a lot more energy coming out of the music world than from the art world. When I was visiting New York on the weekends, I tended to gravitate more towards what was happening in music clubs than towards what was happening in museums and galleries.

I came to New York in '78 on an exchange program at Cooper Union, and when I went back to Boston I started performing as a duo with guitarist Kurt Henry. I didn't have an instrument so I sang and made these background tapes for the performances. We didn't have a drummer so that's why I started using skipping records and things like that, to produce these rhythm tracks that we'd perform along with. We also used film loops from cartoons and sex films as audio-visual rhythm tracks. It was as much

performance art as it was music. In 1980 I organized a festival (Eventworks), to explore the relation and influence of rock music on the art world. I invited people like DNA, Rhys Chatham and Karole Armitage, Dan Graham, Johanna Went, Boyd Rice, Zev to Boston. I showed films by Eric Mitchell, Jack Smith, Vivienne Dick, and others.

PSF: How did you pick out which records would be used?

CM: They were just thrift store records --I never spent more than a dollar on a record. It was just junk, and I would stick things on them to make them loop. I even used an old wind-up gramophone that I found in the garbage. It was also at MassArt that I found these great turntables (Califone) that I've been using ever since. They used to be in every school's audio-visual department for instructional presentations.

PSF: Do you think of recontextualization with your work?

CM: Sometimes people will hear something, and they'll ask 'did you play this' when I actually didn't. It's interesting that audiences have this need to identify the source material. Once different unrelated records are combined, they sometimes have the power to trigger the memory of a tune. I don't consciously make music to trigger memory but it happens naturally. Music has such powers in triggering memory, collective memory and private memory. What I consciously try to do is to use the widest variety of music. These records often have different sets of references for different people, because most memories are personal and subjective. Whatever happens in their mind is something that I can't control, I can't control what they think about what I'm doing. It's like silent audience participation.

PSF: A lot of your work has involved the destruction of records. What was your idea behind that?

CM: I realized that when I listened to a record, there were all these unwanted sounds, clicks and pops, because of the deterioration of the record, the surface noise, scratches. Instead of rejecting these residual sounds, I've tried to use them, bringing them to the foreground to make people aware that they're listening to a recording and not live music. These sounds make people aware of the medium, of the vinyl, a cheap slab of plastic. It's something so important because it's the way that we relate to music most of the time, through recordings. We usually make abstractions of the medium. For me, it was important to have this awareness and underline it, to give it a voice. It has an expressive power in itself. When something goes wrong, like when the needle skips, something unpredictable happens, that wasn't the intention of the recording artist. In that incident, something new and exciting happens. For me, it has creative potential.

PSF: That makes me think of a quote I heard where someone at a concert said 'you know, this almost sounds as good as the CD.

CM: Because people hear music mostly through recordings, the recording becomes the reference, the template. Musicians try to reproduce their CD's on stage, the audience already knows the music through the recording and that's what they are expecting to hear.

What happens on the stage is not necessarily what I want to happen on the CD. That's why there's so few live recordings of my work. Your concentration and your attention are so different when you're listening to a recording at home, where you can play the same piece over and over and stop it at any time you want or be lying down in bed. It's a totally different experience. When I listen to live recordings of my performances, I become very critical, a recording is not a live concert, it requires a different listening, and it changes with multiple plays. When you're performing live, you're really responding to the moment. A section may feel good live, but as a recording it drags, it doesn't have the same intensity it did when you were present because you're missing the visual, the process.

In my work the process is very important, to be able to see it and hear it. I'm using these records and you can see how I manipulate them and abuse them. Everything, the pace that the records get changed, how long they stay on the turntables, what kind of shape they're in, the manipulations, etc. All these actions inform the listening. I use the recording studio very differently. When you're not on stage, you can go back and try again and edit. The studio is another instrument. I don't want the listener to forget it is a recording. That's why when I made Record Without A Cover I made sure that when you put it down on your turntable, you wouldn't forget that you're listening to a record.

PSF: Have you thought of working with CD's in similar ways that you've worked with records?

CM: The CD's are part of a different technology. They're not as simple and mechanical as records and turntables. I tried fooling around with CD players but only in the recording studio. You can get them to stay in a skip mode and gradually slide through a song. That offers possibilities. Whatever the machine can do, except play the piece from beginning to end, whatever you can do to make it sound different is potentially interesting. There are people out there experimenting like Yasunao Tone who's been doing things with skipping CD's for a long time. But you can't physically scratch a CD or cut it in half and expect the machine to still play it. And performing with a CD on-stage is not very exciting visually.

PSF: You've talked about shows you had in the '80's where you performed with hip-hop DJ's. How do you compare their work to yours?

CM: They were doing dance music - that's the major difference. I've never tried to do dance music. The similarity is that we used records as instruments to create new music out of old music. The great thing about hip-hop is that it really made DJ'ing more of an accepted craft. MTV also helped in giving the scratched sound a gesture, showing the hand of the DJ back spinning, it became such a cool gesture and now everybody wants to scratch. I see kids now air-scratching while walking around with their walkman. That sound and the way it was used in hip-hop, scratching a beat and hearing the record go back and forth has become so natural in the pop music landscape. Now it's a staple sample on most keyboards. It's a normal sound now, but it was a revolutionary sound in the 80's --it really made the use of found sounds acceptable in pop music. Since the invention of records, experimental musicians have explored the field, such as Musique Concrete in the 50's. Before the tape recorder, everything was recorded on disc so people thought of ways to use these recordings to make music. It's so obvious. You have a recording and you play it at a slower speed and you get something new. So why not just use it?

As you were mentioning in the '80's, there were no collaborations --I was just a young marginal artist doing my thing. I had no power. I tried to get in touch with those DJ's but it was very hard. They wanted to make hit records. I just wanted to make challenging music and have fun. I was interested in things that had no commercial value at the time, so why try to convince people that listening to a lot of noise can be fun?

PSF: You've said 'thrift stores are a better place to find music than a record shop.' What did you mean there?

CM: It was part of a financial situation. I could only afford records in thrift stores. Then you could find wonderful things, but now everything is a collectible. I like the recycling idea --using the stuff that people don't want anymore, and make new music out of it. There was an element of looking back and listening to your parents' records and doing something with that stuff. Sort of acknowledging the past while rejecting it at the same time.

PSF: You've done some museum/gallery installations. You were talking about the differences between a studio recording and live shows so what about installations? How do you see that medium?

CM: Unfortunately, one of the big differences is the audience. I've always tried to break down these divisions. Some people just listen to music others just look at art, some do both but they don't do it in the same place. It's sad that a lot of people can't be open-minded enough to be curious about something they don't understand. Making exhibitions that focus on sound in a visual art context is interesting to me. Having an interest in both worlds it was natural for me to bring them together. Everybody experiences music one way or another, music is usually more democratic than art, so I feel I can touch more people with it, even if I make a piece that doesn't make any sound, but deal with notions of perception of sound. We take a lot of our sound experiences for granted. We don't question sounds as much as images.

PSF: With turntable musicians and DJ's, do you think that the style has evolved enough to produce a musical equivalent of a Jimi Hendrix or a John Coltrane?

CM: If the turntable is a legitimate musical instrument, then some people are going to push the boundaries and see how far you can go with this instrument. I don't think I've seen a Jimi Hendrix of the turntable. But there's so much more going on now. When I started using records, hip-hop was just being born, and now everybody wants to be a DJ. Still, most DJ's do very commercial work. But a lot of them are really pushing the envelope and stretching the notion of the DJ and with interesting results.

PSF: Anyone in mind when you say that?

CM: Otomo Yoshihide is someone I'm working with right now on a collaboration for Asphodel. He's an interesting DJ and really knows how to improvise with the records. He has great energy. Then there is the New York illbient scene with DJs like Olive, The Audio Janitor, and Toshio Kajiwara. They're always telling me about other kids doing interesting things and I'm just discovering new things through them. I've collaborated with Toshio and Olive in group improvisations. The other project I'm releasing with Asphodel is a compilation of live recordings that I've done over the last year with some of these younger DJ's. These are live performances. It's not a solo project -- when you think DJs, you think of them as solo artists with big egos. But if the turntable is really an instrument then why not have a band and play the instrument in combination with others. To react to sounds that don't come out of your own records, that's the ultimate challenge for a DJ. I've been trying for many years now to push this notion of the DJ as a band member, and I have been interested in groups of DJ's improvising together like a jazz band. So this record will be really featuring the instrument as a collaborative tool. It's hard to tell who's doing what when you're listening to these recordings. There's certain stylistics particular to each DJ, but when you hear a skipping loop, you think 'who's doing it' but who cares really? The result is a real collaborative effort and you have to listen to all these sounds democratically.

PSF: What do you think of other people who are other deconstructionists, like Negativland and John Oswald?

CM: They both do great work. I remember touring in 1980 in San Francisco when I found out about Negativland. They had just released their first LP with hand made covers, each cover was a different collage. What amazes me is how this kind of home-grown stuff, which was so marginal, so anarchic at the time, has been able to create such a following. It's interesting that you mentioned these two names because they both managed to get sued. It's probably why they've gotten famous. So its seems that to be famous you either have to make pop music or get sued by pop music. It's great work because it doesn't fit into any clean little box and it's very political. They are critical of the music industry but they're also totally dependent on these machines that the industry puts out like samplers and tape recorders. There's a contradiction between what's out there --available machines to record and remix-- and the legal system. I don't have a clear answer to the copyright issue but there's this huge contradiction between what artists are doing and what the law wants to set up. Sony corporation makes the machines but they'll sue you for using them. John Oswald and Negativland's work is

essential. They're true artists in the sense that they've really created something original and very potent and in touch with what's out there. They're not just entertainers, they make us think.

PSF: What did you think of this interest in DJ's happening with techno now?

CM: When I heard of these new DJ's, I just felt like 'what's going on, I thought vinyl was dead?'. What's so hip and sexy about scratching record? I always thought it was a little nerdy. It didn't seem like this whole illbient and techno crowd could generate so much interest. But there's something about scratching a record that has become so glamorized, so photogenic that it's a cool thing to do. Maybe 'cool' is really the word because it's so detached and so distant in relation to live music, have you ever seen a DJ sweat? I was the first one shocked to see all these kids doing it. But the wonderful thing is that suddenly I have colleagues to play with and a new audience.

PSF: What kind of advice would you give to someone thinking of using a turntable as an instrument?

CM: Try something else! (laughs)

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